

Forced Ration May Be Nation's Fate

Threat From Hoover Seen in Statement of 1918 Food Plans and the Need of Economy Is Imperative to Save Morale

By GUY R. CARPENTER.

THE first statement of his plans for feeding the world during 1918 appears between the lines of the new home card which Herbert C. Hoover, food engineer, sent to 10,000,000 American housewives and caterers last week. The card asks the voluntary cooperation of those who feed the nation in cutting down the consumption of the most concentrated foods—wheat, meat, fats and sugar. It says nothing about prices, nothing about future supplies and nothing about what steps will be taken if Americans fail to be frugal.

But between the lines there is a story; and if the story had a title it would be, "Failure of Americans to save food voluntarily will bring compulsory rationing in 1919."

When the war broke out in Europe Mr. Hoover, who is one of the world's foremost consulting mechanical engineers, was living in London. Americans, penic stricken in their efforts to return to the United States, found that gold and gold alone was current money. They knew not which way to turn in their fear lest they be caught within the battle lines. It was then that a friend of Mr. Hoover asked him to go to the American Embassy in London and help out.

Mr. Hoover jumped into a taxicab and went. And from that moment he was slated for the job of feeding the world.

When he reached the embassy he first gave a demonstration of his ability by getting into communication by telephone with seventy-five wealthy Americans in two hours—and the telephone system of London is notoriously one of the worst in the world. The Americans answered the call of Mr. Hoover and brought all the gold they had to the embassy. The congestion of embargoed Americans was cleared up in jig time.

It was a feat that took away the breath of officials, and when the Commission for Belgian Relief was organized Mr. Hoover had no more chance to sidestep the job of managing the undertaking than he later had of refusing the office of Food Administrator for America and the world. Not that Mr. Hoover thinks he is the only man qualified for the place of Food Administrator—if you could read his mind after six days of the fourteen hour work day he is putting in at Washington you would discover that at times he feels that there are many men who could be drafted for his job to the advantage of every one concerned.

A number of speeches have been made and many printed pages issued in an attempt to make clear just what Mr. Hoover is trying to do. Because food prices began to soar when the United States entered the war the public got the idea that the sole and only purpose of President Wilson in naming Mr. Hoover Food Administrator was to bring prices down. It is true that Mr. Hoover is interested in prices; but prices, broadly speaking, are only a secondary consideration with him now.

The main job of Mr. Hoover from now until next October is to feed the world. You will see many posters urging food conservation, you will read much about the licensing of food dealers and the effort to raise greater crops this year. But these are only a part of the undertaking which Mr. Hoover is trying to carry out. His job is to keep the world fed, and on the result of this undertaking alone he will be adjudged a success or a failure.

Of all the executives in Washington Mr. Hoover probably knew best just how Dr. Harry A. Garfield, Fuel Administrator, felt when he was forced to order that the country shut down for fourteen days. In the first week of last September it looked for a few hours as if Mr. Hoover would have to ask the country to shut down for a few weeks on the consumption of wheat.

The Allies had frankly shown an empty flour barrel and during the closing days of August 400,000 barrels of flour were sent to them. When the ships got out of port and the stock on American shelves was checked up it was found that New York city had less than twenty-four hours supply of flour, that Philadelphia had two days supply, that Pittsburgh had less than a week's supply and so on across the country.



The new wheat crop was on its way to market and the mills, but there was some tall scrambling on the part of the Food Administration to get the supplies of the nation spread over the East. It was thin spreading, but it turned the trick. If the newspapers had printed the facts there would have been a rush for flour and a food panic.

Thanks to good weather and the railroads the Federal Food Administration overcame the difficulty by a narrow margin. Later Mr. Hoover was forced to figure closely on the sugar supplies. In the instance of sugar, however, his luck failed him. The new crop was about three weeks late, the public learned the truth and began to hoard sugar and prices began to jump.

As it turned out the American public did not lose its nerve; as military experts might say, its morale was unimpaired by the reverse. But it might have been if supplies for the market had been further away than they happened to be.

That is the fear which is tugging constantly at the hearts of every war administration to-day. The fear is in Washington, it is in London, it is in Paris and it is in Rome. The morale of the people and of the soldiers must be sustained, and the present war has proved beyond a doubt that the relation between hunger and despair and defeat is very close.

Every soldier on the front in Europe knows there is not enough food in Europe to feed Europe. He knows that the folk back home are not being fed as well as he is. And when his rations are cut down he at once realizes that his wife and his children back home are in sore straits. That is when he begins to cave in and retreat.

The retreat of the Italian army last November brought the lesson more vividly to the world than ever before. Food experts say that the food sent to Italy was unevenly distributed, that some provinces were given greater shares than others. German agents circulated reports to this effect among the soldiers. The reports were true and the soldiers began to distrust their leaders and the success and justice of their cause. The retreat followed.

The secret enemy more feared to-day by food administrators than the autocracy of the Kaiser is the rumors of food shortage, which spread so rapidly through nations fighting for life. The food administrators are constantly anxious lest some district in this country or abroad will suddenly go mad with the fear of starvation and overthrow in senseless rage all Government agencies. The story of Russia in recent months shows what a starving people will do.

Great Britain and France have much at stake. Their people will fight on and endure great privation. But it is no idle speculation to say that the menace of food riots is always near. No one knows

where they would lead. Certainly food riots are among the greatest causes for rejoicing that the enemy can have. You know with what a feeling of hope you have read of the protests of the Austrian people against the refusal of Hungary to ship them food. These protests have shown that the enemy is cracking under the strain, that they are losing in morale.

Now, how is Mr. Hoover keeping up the morale of America and the Allies? It rests with him to get them food. Given food they will fight on to the bitter end. Endless figures to show why the world cannot eat as it did in the days of plenty before the war took millions of men from industry and the farms. These figures have been given wide publicity and are known to almost every one.

How, then, will America cut down her food supply in order that the fighting strength of the Allies can be sustained? She must do it by putting complete faith in the ability of Mr. Hoover so to balance the supply of food and the selling price of food that America will not eat too much.

It is easy to say that Americans are loyal and that Americans will cut down the amount of food they eat. But experience so far in the war does not prove this to be true. There was a lot of talk about meatless and wheatless days in the hotels and restaurants. There is no doubt that much good was accomplished. But for all the talk and for all the exchanges of praise which have been going on it is a sad fact that the Food Administration has in effect asked that Congress pass a new law which will give the Government power to fine and imprison the public eating place owners who fail to observe meatless and wheatless days.

France, Germany and Italy have come to the rationing plan. England has adopted it in part and will no doubt adopt the plan wholly within a short time. It would seem that, unless Americans are made of far different stuff than the Europeans, similar steps must be taken in this country.

That is why the 1918 home food card, the brown card that is to hang in the kitchens of millions of homes and which carries the rules for consumption as laid down by Mr. Hoover, tells a very interesting story. It says in effect that if the people who hang the cards in the windows do their bit and see that their neighbors do likewise, compulsory rationing in this country will be unnecessary.

Some economists have pointed out that Mr. Hoover might very easily forget all about his food cards and regulate consumption by permitting prices to go up. These people say:

"Wages have been going up by leaps and bounds in many parts of the country. Among many classes the more money that comes in the weekly pay envelope the more goes out to the groceryman and butcher. Many of our citizens celebrate a greater income by enjoying a

better table. You can no more halt them than you can ask them to go to bed hungry. They never have seen and they never will see the argument of the idealist who tries to change their habits through appeal to their sympathy for starving Belgians. You never can make people frugal by passing laws."

All of which may be true. It remains for 1918 to prove or disprove the theory. As the Food Administration is now working the belief is that prices should be so fixed that the greatest production will be encouraged. It is pointed out that the wheat crop in this country would be no greater if the farmer were given \$3 a bushel than if he were given \$2 a bushel. It is believed that the price of \$2 a bushel is ample incentive to spur him to his best efforts.

From the point of the producer right down to the retailer the Food Administration is regulating prices. The various agencies through which the food passes are allowed each a price for their service; it is called a differential.

The Food Administration agrees that the lower the prices the more food will be packed into American stomachs and the less there will be left to ship abroad. But the Food Administration points out that if prices are permitted to climb to a point where the middle class of Americans eat only as much as they should the prices will be so high that the poorly paid classes will be starving and throwing stones through windows and encouraging the Germans to fight on.

There must be a delicate balance maintained by which the prices will be high enough to keep consumption down and yet not so high that some thousands of poorly paid workers will be hungry. That is the job which Mr. Hoover is asked to manage.

There are a lot of people in the United States who have not been getting increases in wages and there are thousands in the crafts whose incomes have passed those of their fellows in the arts. War brings about a topsy turvy situation and it is not a far stretch of imagination to picture food riots in some of the so-called "residential districts" and full dinner pails going from homes abutting the factory gates.

As it happens Mr. Hoover is called upon to-day to give prime consideration to the 487,000 bookkeepers and cashiers, the 317,000 stenographers of 1910 and the policemen and firemen, the real estate men, the small officials of State and nation, and the elderly multitudes living on small incomes from their life savings. To these people high prices are a menace and from present indications no relief is in sight for them.

Mr. Hoover will try to hold prices where they are by his power of license over manufacturers, packers, canners, millers and wholesalers, from whom the stocks of the retailers are purchased. And the local food administrators will try to make the retailers see the light of reason in keeping prices stabilized. If the retailers are bullheaded in their greed their supplies can be shut off and their stores closed.

At best Mr. Hoover's plan for 1918 is an experiment. He is betting on the belief that Americans will do their duty.

On the other hand, a committee of American business men and others made up of Augustus H. Vogel, a leather merchant of Milwaukee; Norman Bridge, an oil producer of California; E. W. Decker, a banker of Minneapolis; Henry W. Farnum, professor of political economy at Yale; David Kinley, vice-president of the University of Illinois; Herbert Myrick, an agricultural editor of Massachusetts; Charles Nagel of St. Louis, a former member of the Cabinet; Robert J. Thorne, a merchant of Chicago, and J. N. Wallace, a New York banker, after a study of the problem, came to the conclusion that the United States must name a small board of three members which shall fix all food prices.

And to fix food prices is a very near approach to rationing. If Americans back up Hoover all will be well; if they "let George do it," they will soon be going to the grocers and butchers with a little blue card and the card will be good for just enough food to keep them going.